Culture For All Conference on Cultural Mapping 2021

In early 2021, Sahapedia issued an open call inviting researchers, academicians, and practitioners to share their work on cultural mapping with the hope of creating a knowledge repository on the subject in India and regions with similar cultural history like Asia and Africa. Papers were submitted under the following themes - (a) Cultural mapping—theory & practice, (b) Technology for cultural mapping, and (c) Mapping Matters.

Over 60 papers were submitted of which 15 papers were featured in the #CultureForAll Conference. The conference was held digitally on 28 and 29 September 2021, in collaboration with the Centre for Social Studies (CES) at the University of Coimbra, Azim Premji University, the Centre for Internet and Society, and the Re-Centring AfroAsia project at the University of Cape Town.

The papers published on this site are predominantly from South Asia and their research interrogates, discusses, and reflects upon the complex questions of who, what, how, and for whom to map culture. The papers explore a diverse range of subjects and approaches that range from literature in Nagaland and food in Goa to music in South Africa and architecture in Delhi. The authors for the papers include researchers in history, literature, and music, as well as architects and educators.

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Locating Khwajasaras (eunuchs) on the Map of Indian Built Heritage

Author Bio
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Abstract
In the early modern Mughal sociocultural setup, eunuchs or khwajasaras experienced considerable power and authority despite the larger narrative of
patriarchal oppression faced by them. This power is manifested in many architectural endeavours of grand scale that they undertook, which survive till today. There seems to be a dire need of raising awareness about these built structures and engaging the local eunuch communities in the preservation and living culture of these spaces. The paper takes examples of some of the structures built by khwajasaras in the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries in the Agra–Delhi region and aims to argue in favour of the benefits of their better preservation, creating awareness about these structures and associated eunuch community.

**Keywords:** Third Gender History, Architecture of Eunuchs, Early Modern Structures, Engagement of Local Communities, Empowerment of Third Gender

**Introduction**

Past and the way we look at it is always tinted by the present when it is being invoked or recreated. There appear various continuities and ruptures in the process of contextualising the past at any given point of time. The domain of recreating a truthful picture of the time gone by is tricky, muddy and uncertain, and is limited by the nature and amount of archival and material remains available. Yet, despite the limitation of the field of study, it is important to keep enquiring into the past with dedication and rigour. Many times, this enquiry brings forth connections and contexts that hold much value in the present. Amongst the ruptures between the ideas and conditions of the past and those of the present, there is one that holds much significance in today’s social and gender realities. This is of the gradual erosion of power and authority exercised by eunuchs, who were known as *khwajasaras*, in early modern times. The manifestation of the authority commanded by this “third gender” survives today in the form of various architectural remains left behind by them. The sad reality, however, is the absence of consciousness and awareness about these structures in the society at large. The ignorance about these structures commissioned by the khwajasaras is also reflected in the sad state of preservation the structures are in today. The ignorance towards these structures is a reflection of ignorance in present times towards the modern counterparts of these khwajasaras.

There is a need to engage the local khwajasara community and work towards the creation of awareness through various cultural activities about these magnificent structures created by once-powerful “third gender”.

The paper would first provide a brief overview of the power and position held by the khwajasaras in the pre-modern and the early modern world and then it would go ahead to list some of the prominent structures built by khwajasaras in the touristic regions of Delhi and Agra. The proximity of these structures to important tourist destinations allows for the creation of a detour in usual tourist routes to these structures, where the visitors can be introduced to the oppressed gender.
This would create awareness and help engage the local khwajasara community in a productive manner.

Position of Eunuchs in Mughal India
During the Mughal reign in India, eunuchs played the role of trusted servants of their masters and executed many administrative duties. It was the trusted eunuch of Aurangzeb, Danish, to whom Aurangzeb gave the charge of delivering his son Prince Sultan Azam to Shaistah Khan in case he did not recover from his illness (apud Manucci, 2010: 51). Shah Jahan was in the protective custody of eunuch Aitbar Khan during his imprisonment by Aurangzeb (apud Manucci, 2010: 60). Not only were they trusted with matters of personal lives of royalty but eunuchs were also asked by their masters to perform administrative duties. Sometimes, the nature of the duty was similar to the ones usually undertaken by important nobles, for example, Abdullah Khan, an amir of Jahangir’s reign, sent his khwajasara, Wafadar, to govern Gujarat, which was a location of great strategic significance (apud Bhakkari, 1970: 57). Another khwajasara, Khwaja Agah, was given the charge of faujdarship of Agra under the patronage of Shah Jahan, however, a contemporary writer believed that he apparently exerted “more power than his position can afford.” It is also reported that in spite of “mischiefs” of Khwaja Agah, he was “till now honoured, respected and held in esteem” (Bhakkari, 1970: 237).

There are reports regarding Khwaja Hilali, a khwajasara who had once been a ghulam (slave) of Mir Abul Qasim Namakin. He held the post of mir-tuzuk (master of ceremonies) during Akbar’s reign. The eunuch had built a mansion at Agra, where he organised an informal dinner and invited various nobles, including Saeed Khan Chaghata. This noble of Akbar took fancy of the haveli and when, out of courtesy, Khwaja Hilali mentioned that the mansion was in his respect, Saeed Khan bowed thrice before him and took possession of the mansion. Khwaja Hilali protested and the matter was brought before the emperor. On the emperor’s questioning and rebuke, the noble gave instances of his and his family’s long service to the Mughals and upheld the fact that he, in return for those services, should be allowed the possession of the mansion. The haveli, thus was allowed to be taken up by Saeed Khan and the khwajasara lost his mansion (apud Bhakkari, 1970: 192–93). A powerful khwajasara, Itimad Khan, who had risen to the position of 3000 under Islam Shah Sur, when posted in Bhakkar under Akbar, was struck dead by a soldier due to his harsh attitude (apud Bhakkari, 1970: 206). Manucci, an important contemporary observer calls eunuchs animals and generally attributes to them the vicious qualities of being covetous of gold, diamond and pearls and disgraces them by suggesting that they were foul in speech and fond of silly stories (apud Manucci, 2010: 74). These references suggest that even though the eunuchs exercised a considerable amount of power under the early modern Mughal setup, yet their disadvantage in the social hierarchy is evident in the observations made by certain contemporary observers.
A

rchitectural Endeavours of the Eunuchs in Mughal India

Architecture is understood to be the physical expression of ideas and notions (apud Glenn, 2003: 7). In fact, architecture on its bare minimum scale is the manifestation of the religious, cultural, social and political value systems of any society. There are two things that need to be kept in mind when looking at architecture as a political expression—the patron and the audience. Architecture can be primarily seen as an expression of the patron. The interesting aspect of architectural expression is that it indirectly conveys many messages. This argument is being based on the fact that architecture and act of building structures is a deliberate, planned activity with certain ends in mind. The choice and the intention make architecture an expression of power. It can be used as a means to inspire awe and authority in the minds of the audience, especially in the pre-modern or early modern world where the means of communication were limited and the expression of the authority was impressed upon people through subtle means. Architecture then can be seen linked to political power through manipulation of the existing order and building (both literally and metaphorically) an image of the patron in that scheme (apud Glenn, 2003: 13). The depiction takes the forms of the control of the patron over the structure and his/her leadership as glorified or embedded through various means in the architecture constructed by his orders.

The argument being put forth here is that since the patronage of architecture was a domain of the powerful few, its expression could have been used to further certain political ends. These ends may be:

- the act of making one’s name grand and powerful in a particular domain through the expression of architectural endeavours,
- the depiction of power through the grandness and grandeur of the structure,
- the act of pleasing the public of a particular area with the provision of efficient or, at times, free services.

Mughal consciousness was aware of the grandiose power of architecture. The power rested not only in the fact that architecture entails memory through strength and monumentality but also through the acquisition and control of physical space. The power contained in architectural endeavours is both symbolic and physical.

Power is a way of asserting on people certain things (ideas and notions) about the enforcers, which the enforcer or perpetrator wants to assert without actively doing anything. (apud Foucault, 1977: 219) In the context of architecture, exclusiveness, unapproachability, endurance, timelessness and public-private divide, are means to assert power. Further axes of power expression are the size and visibility of the structure, the building style, material and influences.
Thus, it may be said that the khwajasaras’ contribution to the construction of various structures was aimed at commanding a great presence in the public eye with the help of these structures, which were conceived by khwajasaras themselves with the intention of keeping their name alive. (apud Tavernier, 1989: 109) This particular observation about the khwajasaras can be looked as an expression of their desire to leave behind a lineage in stone as the time and society had not left them capable of leaving one in blood. Thus, khwajasaras spent their money on the construction of memorials to their power and authority.

There is much information about the architectural endeavours of khwajasras and there are also certain surviving remains. These structures can be seen as a visual manifestation of power and authority of the khwajasaras. One thing that should be taken into account here is that the structures with their intentions of being memorials to posterity must have also worked as reminders of power, authority and presence of their builders in the period of their construction. The Mughal capitals and their skylines were thus dotted with huge memorials of khwajasaras’ power which pervaded all aspects of Mughal society.

Various literary sources suggest that there was much construction work undertaken by khwajasaras of varying ranks and authority, for example, Itimad Khan who was not only the founder of Itimadpur in the vicinity of Agra but also a builder of a mansion and a water tank therein. (apud Desai, 1993: 216) The water tank survives to date. Khwaja Hilali built a mansion at Agra and also founded a town named Runkata. (apud Desai, 1993: 192–93) Khwaja Ikhtiyar Khan, a khwajasara of Said Khan Chaghata, built in Patna and Bihar Sharif several buildings, bridges, sarais (inn) and hospices. (Desai, 1993: 139) The power of eunuchs in the built spaces of capitals and prominent cities of the Mughals was not only limited to the structures they constructed but they also held the power over the entire cities as governors and faujdars, for example, Itibar Khan, a servant of Babur, was made the governor of Delhi during the reign of Akbar. (Khan, 1952: 705)

The following briefly enumerates some of the surviving structures which were patronised by the khwajasaras

- **Firoz Khan’s Tank and Tomb:** This structure is located to the south of Agra on Dholpur road. It was built by the eunuch Firoz Khan who was the head of Shah Jahan’s harem in the 1640s. (apud Asher, 1992: 232) The structure consists of a double-storeyed gate that leads to the domed octagonal tomb. The decoration of the tomb and gateway hint at the highest aesthetic consciousness of the time. The tomb’s surface is covered with exquisitely carved panels of contrasting coloured stones. And the red sandstone gateway is exquisitely carved with chini-khana motif.¹
• **Sunehri Masjid:** This structure was built for Javed Khan Khwajasara in 1751. This is informed by the inscriptions on the structure. Javed Khan was very close to the Queen Mother Qudsia. The structure, which is not as massive, is located very close to the Red Fort and is a reminder of the powerful position of khwajasaras in the waning phase of the Mughal Empire.

• **Haveli and Garden of Khwaja Agah near Taj Mahal:** Agah Khan was a eunuch in the service of Mumtaz Mahal and was *fanijdar* (magistrate) of Agra and head of the Taj until 1652. The structure is extant and is recorded in a number of early modern maps. (*apud* Koch and Losty, 2017: 22)

• **Hijron ka Khanqah in Mehrauli:** There is a pre-Mughal mosque, dated fifteenth century, that survives at Mehrauli. The structure is now known as Hijron ka Maqbara, which literally translates to “the resting place of eunuchs”. The original history of the structure is not clear and there is no inscription or textual evidence to suggest that this was the burial ground of eunuchs, yet the modern appropriation of the structure and the space as their own by the Hijras or eunuchs of the nearby location has served to develop a lived history of the place. This has led to the preservation and maintenance of the structure and to the preservation of the oral and lived history of the place. As a token example of community engagement in the maintenance of heritage structures, this model can be improved and replicated.

There has been another argument that has been put up regarding tomb architecture under the Mughals, which has a bearing on the structures constructed by the khwajasaras. Basing an argument on the tomb of Khawajara Adham Khan, Catherine Asher (1992: 43) argues that in the Mughal period the octagonal tombs were reserved for the traitors since those tombs had been used extensively by the Surs, who were ‘considered traitors by the Mughals’. By virtue of this argument, the tomb of the eunuchs under consideration should also fall in the same line. This, however, isn’t supplemented by the trustworthy status and nomenclature associated with eunuchs. The argument of octagonal tombs being associated with traitors, hence, doesn’t quite hold. Another thing that should be taken into consideration is that royal tombs like Humayun’s Tomb and Taj Mahal themselves were made on the plan known as *Musamman-i-Baghdadi* or noni-partite plan, which is the one used in the tombs of eunuchs mentioned above. Further, these structures end up creating an outer wall of irregular octagon and a central chamber of octagonal shape. Thus, even the royalty was buried in irregular octagonal spaces, which discredits the fact that tombs and their shapes were related to the loyalty of the builders.
Conclusion

The paper, thus, submits that the presence of khwajasaras in the patriarchal Mughal setup created many ripples in the sociocultural and political life of the empire. Eunuchs appear to form a very important administrative and political limb of the Mughal empire and seem to have been in a symbiotic relationship with the Mughal state and authority. However, when their interests clashed with those higher up in the social ladder, they were persecuted, but the gender aspect did not play out as much in this persecution as it did in the case of clash of their interest with those lower in the social order. The possession of power by eunuchs, however, did not translate into the removal of stigma from the elite and social perception regarding them. Eunuchs were still treated as the “Other” who shouldn’t be allowed much power and who were supposed to be kept in check. Further, the paper adds that in the expression of power and authority of eunuchs, architecture became an important tool. The intention behind the building activities of the khwajasaras was to have their name remembered as they didn’t have progeny to take their names forward. Interestingly, many memorials of their construction activity have survived to date, which serve the purpose for which they were originally built.

Today, the hypocritical nature of social attitude towards eunuchs becomes evident when we dwell on the fact that they were an important limb of Mughal administrative machinery. The deceptive and oppressive attitude towards the ‘third gender’ in a time when they exerted considerable authority is intriguing. Over time, when the power and authority of this section have declined and faded, and the bigotry of society towards them seems to have survived and increased, it becomes important to actively and productively engage them in areas and spaces which were built by their historical counterparts, where they can be given the charge to maintain the structures and spaces. There should be a conscious attempt at locating and reviving the history of structures constructed by eunuchs in popular narrative. There can also be an elaborate cultural engagement where artisans from the section can showcase and sell their products in festivals organised in and around the structures. There can be an oral retelling of the historical stories of the once-mighty khwajasaras. This would help the cause of empowerment of this section. It would also help in filling an important valence in our understanding of the past, where the past positions of this section can be used to argue for improvement in their present conditions and circumstances.
Notes

A detailed work on such lesser-known structures relating to marginalised communities in Agra has been recently submitted by Mohammad Abdullah Raza at Centre of Advanced Study, Department of History, AMU.

References


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